Some pointers for thinking things through

Original LFDP writing with AI assistance. Prepared on 10 October 2026. No endorsement by the organisations cited.

Philosophy examines our questions, concepts and reasons for making judgments. It involves more than quoting an author or stating an opinion. This guide offers a short method for reading a debate, discussing a choice and distinguishing what an idea claims from the reasons offered in its support.

Questions, theses and arguments

A question opens up a problem: 'What makes a decision fair?' A thesis proposes an answer. An argument gives reasons for accepting it. Restating these three elements helps avoid confusing a text's subject with its conclusion. Two people can use the same word while defending different ideas.

Premises are the statements a line of reasoning relies on; its conclusion is what it seeks to establish. In a valid deductive argument, the conclusion must be true if the premises are true. Validity alone therefore does not prove the truth of the premises. Examine both the reasoning's structure and the facts it invokes.

Three families of questions

Epistemology examines knowledge: what do we know, how do we justify it, and what limits do we encounter? It helps distinguish an observation, testimony, a hypothesis and a claimed certainty. Trust in a source can be reasonable without becoming conclusive evidence on every subject.

Ethics studies actions and their justification. Reflection may consider consequences, duties or qualities of character. These approaches illuminate different aspects of a choice; they do not automatically produce a single answer. Political philosophy examines questions such as justice, freedom and the rules governing life together.

Clarify before disagreeing

Define the crucial word. When someone says 'we must be free', do they mean an absence of constraints, a real ability to act, or independence of judgment? Then look for a concrete example and a counterexample. A definition that survives only examples chosen to suit it may need revision.

Present the opposing idea in a form its author could recognise. Distinguish criticism of an argument from an attack on a person. A useful objection identifies precisely which premise, inference or consequence causes a problem. It can improve a discussion even if nobody changes their mind immediately.

An everyday decision exercise

Imagine a group sharing limited speaking time. Write down a possible rule, its justification and a case in which it might be unfair. Ask who benefits, who faces a difficulty, and what adjustment would address it. You are examining how a rule works in practice rather than searching for a perfect slogan.

Finish by separating your current conclusion from the questions still open. State what might cause you to revise your judgment. Rigorous thinking can remain provisional. Recognising a limit does not mean that every opinion is equally well supported. To go further, read a text in context and compare different reasoned interpretations.

Primary sources

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, auteurs et éditeurs scientifiques - Informal Logic
https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/logic-informal/

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy - Epistemology
https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epistemology/

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy - Virtue Ethics
https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/

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